

Living Arts

A new way of thinking about social networks and the world

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Our social networks and where we sit in them set the course for much of what happens in our lives, say Nicholas A. Christakis, a doctor and sociology professor at Harvard, and James H. Fowler, a political scientist at the University of California-San Diego.

In their book "Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives" they argue that our social networks actually comprise a "super-organism." Our lives take shape not just via those we know, our friends and relations, but through their friends and relations, even if we never meet those people.

You might wonder whether too much time on Facebook has addled their brains. But online social networks have little to do with their theory, and human history offers much to support it. They start the book by looking at feud-driven violence, like revenge killings of extended family members and friends in 19th century Corsica, showing how simply knowing someone can put us in harm's way.

They then take us on a pleasant walk through interesting research in anthropology, archeology, history, politics, psychology, medicine, and sociometry (the study of social networks). We learn what it means that we evolved primarily in groups of about 150 members, how a social network brought the Medicis to power in Florence and ultimately opened the modern world to democracy, and how Barack Obama's use of social networking made him president.

They also cite their own 2007 paper arguing that obesity is contagious across social networks. While the authors say their study has been confirmed several times over, even they feel compelled to note that "social network effects are not the only explanation for the obesity epidemic," listing eight others.

The book centers on two concepts: connection and contagion. Connections bring us together in myriad dynamic, constantly changing networks of people. Contagion happens when things - germs, of course, but also ideas or money - flow across our connections. They look at how our extended networks and our interactions with other networks influence our decisions, our health, our careers, our politics, and most other facets of life. Examples include revenge killings, a laughing epidemic in Tanzania in 1962, and waves, both of suicides and those benign ones that break out at sporting events.

Some readers will snort at their arguments. Christakis and Fowler argue that our brains evolved precisely so we could form social networks. We are, they say, hard-wired for collaboration, cooperation, altruism, religiosity, and other generally positive group behaviors.

Their aim is to seed the idea that knowing about networks might shift how we organize our society. For instance, sitting at the center of a social network increases your chances of getting the best gossip, but also of catching a disease. Knowing this, governments should not vaccinate large percentages of the populace, but only those people who sit at the center of social networks. Using network frameworks might help address societal inequality, too. To the authors, networks form the foundation of life. They may be right, but their suggestions generally need much more research before they could be implemented.

That social networks are difficult to track in the real world makes just one of the problems that this new way of thinking about **the world** presents. Christakis and Fowler tend to brush aside the negative aspects of social networks like so many side effects. For instance they have little to say about the effects of becoming "hyperconnected" through things like online social networks.

Christakis and Fowler argue that social networks are "what makes us uniquely human." It happens that ants, bees, and even bacteria form sophisticated social networks. Funny, so do the Borg, the drone-like cybernetic beings in "Star Trek: The Next Generation," and there are places in the book where the authors almost make it sound like we should be happy to be part of such a collective. Still, "Connected" provides a clever, cogent,

and enjoyable look at the latest thinking about humans in community. It provides a swath of important research in one place for readers and makes it a stimulating read.

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BOOK REVIEW

CONNECTED:

The Surprising Power

of Our Social Networks and

How They Shape Our Lives

By Nicholas A. Christakis

and James H. Fowler

Little, Brown, 352 pp., \$25.99

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Caption: Nicholas A. Christakis (pictured) and James H. Fowler argue that our brains evolved so we could form social networks. Pat Greenhouse/Globe Staff/file 2007

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